DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 129 238 IR 004 014

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TITLE Evolution of Guidelines for Information Services.
PUB DATE Jul 76
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the American Library Association Annual Conference (95th, Chicago, Illinois, July 18-24, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Evaluation; Guidelines; *Information Services; *Library Reference Services; Library Standards; Speeches
IDENTIFIERS ALA 76; American Library Association

ABSTRACT

Despite the frequency with which library reference services are evaluated, there is a dearth of guidelines for the operation and evaluation of reference services. An American Library Association committee investigated the issue and made recommendations for improved reference operations, but the nature of information retrieval is rapidly changing, and the information needs of library users are subject to constant modification. Work towards refining reference service standards needs to continue. (EMH)

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Evolution of Guidelines for Information Services
Paper Presented at the ALA Conference, July 20, 1976
by Robert Klassen, U.S. Office of Education

Background

The measurement and evaluation of reference services have been well discussed, even at this conference, and written prolificly about since the evolution of an active information service concept in libraries. There are the great reference studies on measurement by Bernard Berelson, Margaret Hutchins, Louis Shores and Joseph Wheeler. But these studies did little in the way of focusing attention on the qualitative and quantitative factors in providing information services for which the profession began clamoring in the 50's and 60's. Others such as Leon Carnovsky, Lowell Martin, and Samuel Rothstein wrote about the compelling need for quantitatively-based appraisals and offered practical guidelines for reference services. Yet the reference librarians remained unconvinced of the worth of such studies and uncertain of their methodology.

The incentive to evaluate reference services, however, continued to be there, particularly by the library administrator who needed to know something about the effectiveness of an institution's public information service outreach to justify the budget. Admittedly, the task to evaluate public services was a formidable one for researchers. When compared with other library activities such as circulation, acquisitions, and cataloging, reference service was considered too difficult to quantify. There was little agreement on its functional definition. Questions often asked were: Were interlibrary loan activities an integral part of reference work because reference librarians handled it? Was formal instruction in the use of books and libraries part of reference work? If, after having finally decided what the reference librarians did, the question remained--how could anyone readily determine the impact or the effectiveness of their service? One of the purposes of this session then is to focus on this lack of definition--as a management problem and to determine whether there is a body of reference theory upon which guidelines can be formulated.

The evaluation of reference service, whether within a single library or with respect to groups of libraries, is a rarity indeed in the reference literature. Evaluation presupposes measurement against specific standards or goals and no area of library science has been more deficient in such standards than reference services. A review of official statements of standards reveals that they usually say little or nothing about specifications for reference service than that there "should be such services available." One of the writers notes that "the evaluation of reference service can best be depicted as a closed circle of futility". Perhaps there are those here who would agree. The clearest conclusion that can be made from the literature is that reference librarians, in failing to provide an adequate means for a base for judgment of their contribution to library services in the last 100 years, have run the serious risk of having their work not appreciated by cost-saving budget analysts.

What Was the ALA Initiative

In 1960 ALA created a new Reference Services Division Committee on Standards headed by the venerable Louis Shores. The Committee was given the charge to reexamine the nature of reference work as a prelude to their developing reference standards. All types of libraries were to be considered and examined. As a first step, the Committee prepared a preliminary statement concerning the nature, scope, and type of reference activities which served as the base for the statement in the present Committee's guidelines. It outlined some components of information service and

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a conceptual framework of service for all types of libraries. Let me read from some excerpts taken from the Committee's report in RQ, June 1961: [pick up from attachment#1]. With this effort the Committee, one notes, was unable to go any further in identifying other desirable service elements or quantifying these activities which had so long eluded previous library science researchers.

A reactivated ALA Committee in 1968 once again attempted to provide another building block to develop guidelines for effective information service in increasingly diverse institutional settings.

That Committee commissioned a study in 1970 to identify current reference measurement and evaluation devices and techniques being used by all types of library institutions providing reference services in one major metropolitan area--Atlanta, Georgia; (1) it noted the use made of reference statistics; (2) it surveyed the levels of user satisfaction with the reference services available to them; and, (3) it attempted to determine the library interest in standards for reference services.

The Study showed that only 1/3 of those entering a library felt impelled to ask the reference librarian for informational help. Two-thirds of those using reference services were doing so in connection with some organized study activity. 81% of the users were 25 years of age or younger. The users were pleased generally with the information provided, with the academic library user much more critical of the information service than the public library user.

Available to this user group were 108 libraries, 50% of which were open 40 hours a week or less. More often than not, paraprofessional personnel were manning the reference desk on weekends and during the late afternoon and evening hours.

Reference statistics were kept by more than 50% of the libraries, with most of these keeping simple counts, similar to circulation statistics. Interestingly, nearly 50% of the libraries participated in some cooperative program which provided a library reference backup for information resources. On the other hand, only 18% of the libraries had ever completed any kind of user analysis. Of these, only 10% noted specific information on user satisfaction. The most clearly defined trend observed in most of the libraries was that there was no written institutional policy for reference service. Most institutions seemed to have accepted the routine of providing library information service for which no institutional goals or objectives were spelled out.

It appeared obvious to that Committee that the development of practical guidelines for the operation of good reference services was a reasonable beginning building block on the road to consideration of reference standards. Here were some of the conclusions reached on the basis of these observations:

1. Libraries needed to define and publish their service objectives so that their clientele will know the types of services available to them.

2. The closer the reference desk was to the main flow of parton traffic, the more effective the information service was.

3. User reaction to the reference service was most insightful, and might have altered many existing patterns of service, such as the location of the reference desk, if only these reactions were known by the librarian.

4. Key to user satisfaction was the staffing existing at any one hour; weekend patterns of professional staffing were weak and correlated with higher user dissatisfaction.

5. Most reference collections were developed with no selection policy to govern its expenditures or, more basically, to reflect the user clientele interests.

6. Formal and informal instruction were clearly effective in increasing user satisfaction in the use of the library's resources.

What Was ALA's Response

It was obvious that the focus of any reference service planning must be accomplished in the milieu of a changing user interests in most of our libraries. Information retrieval systems required rethinking the established methods of reference services. Levels of reference services, particularly in relation to library networks for reference backup, needed to be defined where libraries were committed to reach out beyond their traditional institutional users to provide informational services.

"A passive reference service just won't surive in our economy" was a phrase that appeared in these deliberations. It was also felt that a good reference librarian must also have the instinct and knowledge to negotiate the question and answer process as well as deliver the needed information. From these rather obvious insights, it was felt that a philosophic concept of reference service which is clearly expressed in guideline statements could be developed.

Now with this background, you have some information service guidelines about which the next speaker will discuss in some further detail.

I would agree that this profession needs the measurement tools by which we "fine-tune" our service activities. Hopefully, we can discuss some tested quantifiable measures which have proven so elusive to the early pioneers of reference study, such as Louis Shores and others. Recent research is beginning to show us some new measures of service activity. It would be nice to say that service guidelines could be developed in tandem with these efforts, all designed to galvanize the profession to a higher level of good information service. But, I don't believe we have arrived. These guidelines can only provide the framework for improving those services. After a century of attempts, the work toward developing standards appears to be well said in the musical refrain - "we have only just begun".

Attachment # 1

1. Reference services in a library should be recognized as a critical responsibility of library administration, specifically organized to ensure the optimum use of the library's collection.

2. Since all functions of a library may be viewed, in ultimate terms, as geared to facilitate use of the library's collections, the distinguishing feature of reference services is in its relationship to the library's patrons. These services are of two essential types—direct and indirect.

3. Direct reference service consists of personal assistance provided to library patrons in pursuit of information. Direct reference service may take one of many forms, each of which may consist of a number of activities, of which only the most frequent and representative are cited below:

(a) *Instruction* in the use of the library and in the use of items in the library's collection. This service may range from demonstration of how to fill out a call slip to explanation of the use of catalogs, bibliographies, and reference works, to assistance in interpreting the contents of materials in the library's collections. The central feature of this instruction, irrespective of its level or its intensity, is to provide guidance and direction in the pursuit of information, rather than providing the information itself.

(b) *Information Service.* This service may range from answering an apparently simple question through recourse to an obvious reference source, to supplying information based on search in the collections of the library, combining competence in bibliothecal techniques with competence in the subject of inquiry. The character and extent of library information service will vary with the kind of library, with the patron the library is designed to serve, and with the skill, competence, and professional training of the reference librarian providing the information service. Characteristic functions of information service are finding specific data or facts, interpreting the material or information found, translating, abstracting, literature searching, and others. The central feature of information service, irrespective of its level or its intensity, is to provide an end product in terms of information sought by the library's patron.

4. Indirect reference service comprises the preparation and development of catalogs, bibliographies and all other reference aids which help in providing access to the library's collections and which extend the library's services through cooperation with other, or larger, or more specialized libraries. This recognizes the significant role of the technical or processing services of the library as indispensable to the reference function.

General Note: No schematic rationalization of the reference function in libraries can truly correspond to the realities of day-to-day work with the library's public. The level, character, and variety of reference service that has been traditionally offered by libraries is a function of many factors, including the size of the library, its physical and fiscal resources, as well as its philosophy of service. The foregoing outline offers a concept of reference service which is broader in scope than many libraries can achieve. It recognizes, however, that the reference functions, as described, are in fact provided by libraries large and small, without necessarily being recognized as such. Effective understanding of the nature and the role of reference service in libraries should lead to more efficient and effective development of such service in a climate of total cooperation within a library, and of administrative recognition of its critical role in the overall mission of the library.